DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 151 935 EA 010 432

AUTHOR Uchitelle, Susan
TITLE Policy Implications for School Districts Affording Public School Options: A Case Study of Results of School Choice in One Community.
PUB DATE Mar 78
NOTE 38p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Asscciation (Toronto, Ontario, March 27-31, 1978)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 Plus Postage. HC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Case Studies; Decision Making Skills; Elementary Secondary Education; *Free Choice Transfer Programs; *Parent Attitudes; *Parent School Relationship; *Public Schools; Questionnaires; Tables (Data)

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the policy implications of school choice opportunites in the public sector, based on a study of the school choice behavior of a group of public school parents residing in areas where they were permitted to choose which of two dissimilar schools their child would attend. Data were gathered through interviews with 48 mothers who were either new to the community or whose eldest child had just entered school. Parents' involvement in the choice of their child's school and the criteria they used were examined, and the results of these choice opportunities were analyzed. Findings of the study indicated that for school choice opportunity to work equitably and effectively, parents must be fully informed of their options, and the schools must be willing to develop solutions to the problems resulting from school choice without subverting the right of parental choice and the sovereignty of parental decision-making. (Author/JG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED151935

U S DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF
EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Policy Implications for School Districts Affording Public School Options: A Case Study of Results of School Choice in One Community

by

Susan Uchitelle
Parkway Public Schools
St. Louis County, Mo.

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association

Toronto
Spring, 1978

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL IN MICROFICHE ONLY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Susan Uchitelle

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC) AND USERS OF THE ERIC SYSTEM."

EA 010 432

Introduction

In this country the decision on where a child attends public school has conventionally been the legal prerogative of the local educational authorities. School districts for the most part assign families to schools on the basis of where they live. The programs parents encounter in these settings are conventional in nature and designed for the majority of families. Personal preferences--for moral education, religious training, structured classrooms, informal teaching environment, artistic opportunities, scientific emphasis--are not taken into account in pupil assignment. Only a few districts have departed from the traditional practice of assignment without choice and allowed residents some opportunity to determine school assignments based upon personal preferences involving a school's distinctive philosophy, atmosphere, or curriculum. In most instances in the public domain schools rarely respond to the educational preferences of their constituents despite the growing evidence that parents are dissatisfied with the quality of today's public schools and are seeking more control over their child's educational environment, in particular, the opportunity to choose a school setting congruent with their value orientation.[1] For those parents who can afford independent schools there are attractive alternatives including parochial or private schools and sometimes a public school in a different district that accepts non-resident children. But these opportunities are rare.

---

[1]Parents are expressing continued concern with public school education. Some want other choices in the public domain. Others, at an alarmingly increasing rate, are seeking private education. (See Nault, Erickson, Cooper, Hard Times for Non Public Schools, Elementary Principal, 1977.)

Nevertheless, there are public school districts that offer different educational settings and allow parents some kind of a choice. These school districts (e.g., St. Louis Magnet Schools, Quincy, Illinois, Chicago Magnet Schools, Alum Rock, California, Minneapolis, Minnesota) have responded to their clientele and created a spectrum of qualitatively different schools. Advocates of school choice argue that there are benefits from school selection both for parents and children. These benefits can include increased parental control of school policies, more parental involvement in school programs, enhanced student performance, more effective teaching, increased accountability by the schools, better placement for children, and more equal access to educational opportunities (Coons & Sugarman, 1977; Doyle, 1977). For the social egalitarian, school choice may be an important ingredient in helping to remove the constraints that race, economic level and housing impose upon society.

But because of the paucity of public school districts offering choice, there have been few opportunities for actual research on how parents make choices, which parents investigate school options, and which actually take advantage of the opportunity for choice. Little has been written about the effects of choice upon school districts in terms of the responsibility of the district to inform all constituents of choice, the problems of a district faced with oversubscribed or undersubscribed schools, the lengths to which districts would be willing to go to honor any parental request for a school or teacher of choice, and other important policy issues. These questions involving the process of choice and the resultant policy implications for schools must be addressed before the offering of alternative settings within

the public domain becomes a model for changing patterns of school affiliation (in formats such as those suggested by Fantini, 1973, or Coleman, 1974). This paper does not address all these issues, but indicates some results of choice in one community that could be useful to school districts intending to offer choice.

Focus of the Study

The purpose of the study discussed in this paper was to examine the choice behavior of Collegeville[2] parents who had school choices and were sending their children to school for the first time--parents new to the community and long-time residents whose oldest child was entering school for the first time--and to derive policy implications for the district as a result of the findings on parental choice. The study did not intend to offer solutions to the issues raised, but, rather, to bring to light some of the issues that must be resolved by schools if they are to offer choice.

Interviews with the parents had several objectives. One was to find out if parents offered a choice deliberated about the options available to them, and if so, what factors were important in their decisions. Distance, race and personal influence were considered as possible reasons for choice, since the literature examined prior to the study indicated that these three explanations were the most frequently posited for school choice behavior. If none of these were reasons for choice, then the study hypothesized that parents engaged in a process comparable to a consumer evaluating a product prior to making a selection.

---

[2]"Collegeville" is a pseudonym for a district which, during the duration of the study, preferred to remain anonymous. Further information about the district may be obtained upon individual request from the author.

A second intent of the interviews was to help determine what procedures parents followed when selecting a school; that is, did parents merely pick the closest school, did they rely upon associates for information, did they visit the schools, talk with teachers, search extensively, spend little or much time deciding what school to choose? And finally, the analysis of parental responses led to a discussion of the implications of options for school districts.

The issues discussed in the section on policy implications focus on information about which parents were aware of choice, and which were not, which parents deliberated about their choice opportunity and which did not, what must schools do as public institutions to fully inform their constituents of the availability of choice and what issues must school districts be alerted to as a result of offering parental choice. The community which was a focus for this study, the elementary schools that served the optional attendance zones, the characteristics of the families within the zones, the subjects for this study and the interviews are all discussed in the following sections.

Setting

Collegeville is a community of over 47,000 persons (figures from 1970 census data) with a school population of approximately 7,000 (1976 data). It is a midwestern suburban residential community with some commerce and industry. The community is ethnically, racially and socioeconomically diverse. It is a middle class suburb with 73% of its employed workers in white collar occupations. Collegeville has a reputation for educational excellence which has long attracted people to its community.

In Collegeville there is one high school, one alternative high school, one junior high, one middle school and eight elementary schools. There are eight regular elementary school zones within the district and three special attendance zones within the eight regular zones; four elementary schools serve the three special attendance zones. Parents living within the special zones or optional attendance areas are permitted to choose to which of two nearby schools they will send their children. The boundaries of these optional attendance zones have changed somewhat over the years but the zones have been in existence for many years.

Although the historical reasons for the creation of these optional attendance zones remain obscure, some administrators speculate that the zones were created to relieve overcrowding in certain schools. Even though the original reasons for these zones remain hidden, the consequences for parents within the zones remain the same. They may choose one of two schools in their zones and their choice is easy to implement. The parents simply enroll the child in the school chosen; no board or district approval is required.

Each of the three optional attendance zones has distinctive characteristics as do the schools that serve them. Zone 1 is a high income neighborhood which is not racially integrated. It has both expensive homes and apartments in which white collar workers live. A large proportion of University graduate students live in this area in faculty housing. Zone 2 is a racially mixed area with parents earning moderate incomes and owning moderately priced homes. There is also a small white collar apartment community within its boundaries. Zone 3 is characterized by moderate, relatively new

housing and upwardly mobile population. Residents are both blue and white collar workers who have left the large contiguous urban community to seek better neighborhoods. This zone is predominantly black.

The four elementary schools within these three optional zones are like the other district elementary schools in that they provide no special services such as transportation, innovative programming (except as encouraged by the district for all the schools), supplemental staffing or programs not provided elsewhere in the school district. But while not intending to be different, over time they have developed into qualitatively different schools, making choice significant.[3] In one zone parents have an option between a virtually all-white school and a racially mixed one. In another zone parents may choose between a school which is structured somewhat traditionally or a school which has some multi-age grouping and aspects of an open education program. In still another zone parents may choose between a predominantly black school which features flexible groupings and team teaching and an integrated school with a traditional educational format. Thus the Collegeville parents have choices comparable to parents who participate in a multi-option system of schools. The Collegeville parents within these attendance areas regularly make a choice between two dissimilar though not experimental schools and their school decision has been an accepted practice for many years.

Sample

Because the focus of this study was parents who were establishing patterns of school use, only first-time school users were sampled; that is,

---

[3]No racial quotas have governed admission to or exclusion from these schools.

parents either new to the community or whose eldest child was in kindergarten, or one of the primary grades. These parents were selected because they had made their school decision recently and could recall with accuracy the considerations that led them to make it. Parents in these zones who had chosen to use the non-public schools were not questioned, since this study was concerned only with the parents using the public schools and the reasons for their choices. Lists of parents within the optional attendance zones using the schools for the first time were secured from the district office. Mothers of these families (48 in all were part of the study) were contacted for interviews. Of the families interviewed, 19 lived in Zone 1, 21 in Zone 2 and 8 in Zone 3. Thirty of them were white (62.5% of the Sample), 17 were black (35.4% of the Sample) and 1 was a partner in a mixed marriage (a black woman married to a white man).

Within the sample of 48 families there was diverse representation of socioeconomic class and race. Using the Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Class the following social positions were derived. Eighteen families fell into the upper class range and all were white. Nine families fell into the upper middle class range, 9 white, 1 a mixed marriage, and 2 black. Nine families fell into the middle class range, 5 white and 4 black. Twelve fell into the lower middle class range, 10 black and 2 white. Zone 1 parents were predominantly found in the upper-middle and upper class range. Zone 2 parents clustered less at the upper end of the scale. Zone 3 parents were almost exclusively lower middle class.

The school district of Collegeville made no concerted effort to inform parents living within the optional attendance areas that they had a school

choice. Most of the parents heard about the school choice from their neighbors or friends. Yet not all parents were aware of this choice. (See Table 1.) Of the parents interviewed, 34 (71%) were aware they lived in an optional attendance zone and had a choice of one of two schools and 14 (29%) were unaware of that choice. Those who were aware of choice were not a typical group of American families: the education levels of these families was unusally high. These parents had purposely chosen an integrated community in which to live because they wanted their children to attend school with children of other racial and ethnic backgrounds. None were from the lower socioeconomic classes. By comparison, the non-knowers were from the lower socioeconomic groups and were less well educated than those aware of school choice. A predominant number of the non-knowers (83%) were nonwhite and half of them had concluded their education with only a high school diploma while others had had some college; two had gone on to some graduate work and two completed graduate school.[4] (See Tables 1, 5, and 8.)

Table 1

Comparison of Parents Aware of School Choice with Those Unaware of School Choice by Zone

Zone	Parents Who Knew About School Choice	Parents Who Did Not Know About School Choice
1	19 (100%)	0 (0%)
2	12 (57%)	9 (43%)
3	3 (38%)	5 (62%)

[4]For further information about socioeconomic, racial and educational backgrounds of the samples see Uchitelle, "The School Choice Behavior of Parents Afforded a Public School Option," unpublished dissertation, Washington University, 1977.

Data Collection

The main source of data was the focused interview conducted with the mothers. The personal interview seemed the most appropriate form for gathering the kind of information that would best describe the decision making process of the participants. The interviewer first asked if the mothers were aware they had a school choice. If so, then a series of questions was asked about how they became aware, why they picked the school they did, what they wanted in a school of choice and what factors influenced their final decisions. For those persons unaware of choice a shorter interview was held, one asking background information and then focusing upon the kind of information these parents would have liked access to, why they were not aware of choice, and what was important to them in their school. (See interview guide attached to back of paper.) Four interviewers conducted the interviews at the homes of the parents. Each interview was tape recorded, except for three which were conducted by telephone, because of the inaccessibility of theinterviewee. An interview guide, developed after a pilot test and several refinements, was used for all interviews. The written responses to the interviews (each interviewer filled out an interview sheet) were coded and analyzed for percentages, rankings and general numerical data. This data was then verified with the vast amount of taped interview data. All interviewers were experienced, either professional interviewers (two were from NORC) or persons who had been involved in past interview studies and were familiar with the community studied. The data analysis was a response to four possible explanations for choice as researched in the literature available on school choices. Taped responses were analyzed

for content that verified or refuted each explanation. Indices were devised for high, medium or low searchers and parents were placed in appropriate classifications. Policy implications of school choice were drawn from the analysis of the data from all parents in this study.

The reader is to be reminded that the study focused primarily upon the "knowers"--parents aware of choice--since the initial intent of the study was to examine how persons aware of choice made school decisions. But policy implications for school districts affording choice must also be derived from an examination of the "non-knowers"--those parents unaware of choice--as well as the knowers, since a school system offering choice must be certain that all residents are fully aware of choice and able to take advantage of their opportunity to participate in any school decisions offered to them.

Findings

In essence this study found that the majority of parents who made school choices were not making decisions based upon three of the four working explanations--distance, race or personal influence--but were operating instead according to the fourth working explanation; they were involved in some kind of search process in order to find the school with characteristics and opportunities that most corresponded to their own values. Several issues that emerged as most important in the selection process when parents gave unprompted answers were: the structure of the school (teacher manner and skill), overall curriculum and academic programs, student population diversity, atmosphere and climate, and general educational environment (see Table 2).

Table 2

Categorization of Parents Open End Response to Question "What did you consider important to look for when seeking information?"

Category	Number of Responses
Degree to which school is structured	17
Teacher manner: affect and attitude	9
Concern about academic quality	7
Diversity of student population	6
Distance or closeness of school	5
Richness of classroom educational environment	4
Unspecified references to good education	3
Safety	2
General reference to atmosphere and climate	2
Child maintain association with friend	2
Miscellaneous	4
Total	61

There were certain variables that were not important to these parents during their school search. Such criteria as pupil-teacher ratio, student achievement scores, teachers' credentials and years of teaching, and the history of academic success of the school were not primary to their decision making. This is an especially interesting fact given the unusually high level of education of the parents sampled. Of these parents aware of choice, 14 (41%) had professional degrees, 10 (29%) had some post-graduate

training, and 9 (26%) had some college background. But these were also parents of young children entering school for the first time.

A majority of the parents aware of choice took their option seriously and expended considerable effort in the selection process. About three-fourths of them engaged in active search and did not select their schools without some investigation or consideration of alternatives. The analysis also indicated that their choices were not made solely on factors such as school proximity, avoidance of racial differences or the personal influence of significant others (the first three of the four working explanations). Certainly this study corroborates Fantini's contention that parents not only want school options but that they will search for a school that reflects their own value system. The fact that these parents tended to seek variety is probably due to the somewhat atypical nature of the sample--these parents live within a racially mixed community; many are academic and staff employees of a nearby university. Parents in this study overwhelmingly indicated that they wanted the opportunity to have school choice, in fact felt that it was their personal right to choose the educational environment for their child. Where parents had the clearest choice of schools and talked most about that choice (Zone 1), the majority (15 out of 19, or 79%) chose a heterogeneous environment.

This paper has already mentioned briefly what parents aware of choice looked for in a school (kind of classroom structure, teacher manner, curriculum, academic quality, diversity of school population, atmosphere, educational quality--see Table 2). Another way of seeing their priorities is illustrated in Table 3, where the number of "votes," so to speak, indicates the number of times that parents ranked that item as one of the five most

important elements in a school setting. Interestingly, the non-knowers had similar preferences. Of the 14 non-knowers, 9 ranked preferences for the kind of factors they were looking for in a school (Question #14 of the Interview Guide). An analysis of their priority rankings indicates that their four major preferences were atmosphere of the school, access to the principal and teacher, overall curriculum, and distance (see Table 4). Distance is understandably a concern for these parents. Being middle and lower class and predominantly nonwhite, they were accustomed to using the closest school. Moreover, their jobs did not permit them the flexibility of parents from Zone 1 who could generally pick up their children; they were therefore concerned that the children could get home alone, and as early as possible.

Table 3

Number of Parents Interviewed Who Selected Item as One of Top Five Criteria

Item	Number Selecting Item
The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.	23
The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.	15
We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her personal teaching style and classroom skills.	15
We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.	12
We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.	11

Table 3 (continued)

Item	Number Selecting Item
We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and teachers.	10
We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.	8
We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.	8
We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socio-economic backgrounds.	7
We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.	7

Table 4

Tabulated Priorities of the Non-Knowers When Asked What Was Important to Look For in a School of Choice

Item	Number Who Ranked It as One of Five Most Important Items	Rankings Given
Curriculum	5	1,1,2,3,2
Access to Principal/Teacher	5	2,2,3,3,5
Atmosphere	5	1,1,1,4,5
Distance	5	1,1,1,1,5
Different Ethnic/Racial Backgrounds	4	3,3,4,4
Racial Integration	4	2,2,3,3
Safety	4	1,2,3,5

Table 4 (continued)

Item	Number Who Ranked it as One of Five Most Important Items	Rankings Given
Different Socioeconomic Backgrounds	4	3,4,4,5
Principal's Philosophy	3	2,3,4
Transportation	2	4,4
Pupil Achievement	2	4,5
Personal Teaching Style	1	2
Good Library	1	5

In addition, though less strongly, they wanted a diversified student body, both racially and ethnically, safety on the way to school, and a representation of different socioeconomic backgrounds. When comparing these responses with those of parents aware of choice, it becomes evident that both sets of parents wanted approximately the same things in a school.

Nevertheless, the fact remains that one set of parents was deprived of the opportunity for choice. Although not the prime focus of this particular study, these "non-knowers" deserve special attention when it comes to assessing policy implications for schools. In Collegeville opportunity for choice was available, but equity of access was not. Of the 48 parents interviewed, 14, or 29%, did not know they had a school choice. Table 5 indicates that the 14 parents who were unaware of their choice were predominantly lower middle and middle class and had less education than those aware of choice. A predominant number of them were nonwhite (10 out of 14),

The question arises why should 29% of the population offered choice be unaware of that choice?

Table 5

Social Class Status of Persons Aware of Choice and Persons Unaware of School Choice

SES Status	Number of Persons	Aware	Unaware
Upper Class	18	15 (83%)	3 (17%)
Upper Middle Class	9	8 (89%)	1 (11%)
Middle Class	9	7 (78%)	2 (22%)
Lower Middle Class	12	4 (33%)	8 (67%)

The Collegeville school system made no special effort to inform parents of their school option, although it made this information available upon request. Of the parents who knew about the school option, 65% reported being informed of it by a neighbor or a friend and the rest learned from various other sources. For most parents, the informal operating social network of friends and neighbors was the main source of information. A few heard from the school when they inquired about which school to send their child to and some heard from real estate agents when they were buying their homes. But as the data indicated, the primary source was the network of neighbors and friends. One hypothesized reason for the lack of awareness among these fourteen families is that they had recently moved to Collegeville and were thus unable to work into the communication network that would inform them. Table 6, however, indicates that this does not

appear to be a sufficient explanation. A large percentage of parents who were aware of the option were new to the community and a large percentage of those unaware had been residents for two years or more, an adequate time for getting acquainted with the information system. Why, then, do some parents fail to learn of their school options?

Table 6

Length of Residence in Collegeville of Parents Aware and Unaware of Choice

	Less Than 1 year	1-2 Years	2-4 Years	Over 4 Years
Parents Aware of Choice	10 (29%)	1 (2.9%)	5 (14.7%)	18 (53%)
Parents Unaware of Choice	3 (21%)	4 (29%)	5 (36%)	2 (14%)

For one thing, there is evidence in the literature that the informal informational network discriminates against the lower socioeconomic parent since the normal middle class avenues of communication are not available to them. Peter Rossi (1955) indicates that friendships vary by socio-economic areas. Persons from high socioeconomic areas seem to do more visiting and have more friends than residents of lower socioeconomic areas. This appears to be the case in this study. Of the parents who primarily used friends and neighbors, 15 were upper or upper middle class, while only 7 were middle or lower middle class. Table 7 gives a summary of the social class of parents involved in making a choice and the sources of information used by these parents.

Table 7

The Social Class Status of Parents Aware of Choice Who Used the Designated Sources of Information to Find Out About the School Choice and the Numbers Who Used Each Source

Class	Number	F/N*	School Personnel	T/O**	Media	Community Leader
Upper Class (I)	15	10	4	5	4	0
Upper Middle Class (II)	8	5	4	1	2	0
Middle Class (III)	7	4	4	1	0	0
Lower Middle Upper Lower Class (IV)	4	3	0	1	0	0

* F/N = Friends and neighbors
** T/O = Transfer of Ownership

Bridges' study (1974) of family choice in schooling also shows that parental awareness is related to ethnicity and socioeconomic class. The community Bridges studied, Alum Rock, in which a voucher program had been implemented, was a community with a generally low socioeconomic population, a large percentage of which was made up of Mexican-American families. Bridges reported that the non-knowers in Alum Rock were more likely to be nonwhites and to be from the lower SES strata in the community. He speculated that these less aware parents often are alienated from the system and, feeling powerless, do not attend to potentially useful information about the schools. While Alum Rock differs in major ways from Collegeville, some of the patterns Bridges detected can be traced in the data gathered from the Collegeville parents interviewed. The non-knowers

were more likely to be drawn from the lower ranges of the socioeconomic strata represented by the parents studied (see Table 5). The educational level was lower than those who knew of choice: half of the fathers had only a high school education (7 of the 14, see Table 8). Those non-knowers with post-graduate work had lived in the community less than two years. Also the largest percentage of persons unaware of options were nonwhites (10 out of 14).

A second of Bridges' hypotheses is that many of those parents who do not know about their choices have a low expectation for their children's education, and as a result place little value on information they may receive about the schools. Data from this study of middle and lower middle class parents does not appear to replicate these findings. Nearly 60% of the non-knowers moved to Collegeville from the contiguous inner city. Of the 14, 8 ranked better schools as first or second in their reasons for moving into the community. As a group they were concerned about their children's education.

Table 8

Educational Backgrounds of Fathers in Families Aware and Unaware of School Choice Opportunities

Educational Level of Father	Families Aware of Choice		Families Unaware of Choice	
	No.	Per Cent	No.	Per Cent
Professional Degree or Ph.D.	14	41	2	14.3
Some Graduate Work	10	29.4	2	14.3
Some College	9	26	3	21.4
High School	1	2.9	7	50

A few of their responses to questions about what they preferred or wanted in a school or a classroom might be useful in illustrating their interest and concern. "The classrooms are small and I like that. My daughter likes it," said one parent, a resident of Collegeville for one- and one half years. She was a high school graduate and worked as a reconciliation clerk at a bank; her husband was a foreman for a manufacturing company. "The teachers are really concerned," she continued. "Like we were having a problem with her reading. She told us what we could do and I did it and it worked" (Case #47, Zone 3). Another parent who had lived in Collegeville for two years and had just finished the eleventh grade herself was extremely concerned that her child's teacher be aware of her son's learning capacity. This mother was worried that there were too many children in one class and that her child was in a multi-age group classroom. She personally thought that children would do better if there were a single age in a classroom. When asked what she wanted in a school she responded:

> I look to see if the teacher knows when a child is learning. When the teacher can tell about the habits of a child, she knows him. I am most interested in a child learning.
>
> (Case #41, Zone 3)

A third parent, a two year resident of Collegeville (although she had lived there as a child), and a woman with two years of college whose husband was a psychologist, was most definitive about the community she wanted as well as the kind of school she preferred. She said:

> I chose Collegeville because I grew up in the community and I always liked it. I wanted an integrated school, one that was half and half. I wanted it naturally without busing. I wanted this kind of community and I always knew it had good schools. My son is happy there. He has a good teacher and the curriculum is good. He is learning and I have nothing negative to say right now.
>
> (Case #30, Zone 2)

These expressions of concern for an environment that would provide their children with conditions conducive to learning tell us that whether aware or unaware of school choice, parents want essentially the same educational quality for their children. And all of them when asked said they wished they had been more informed about their choices. They would have liked a brochure describing the schools, the differences among them, the choices in curriculum and the alternative class structures available so that they would have been more knowledgeable about their options. These parents, not aware of choice, were really the forgotten persons in this study which primarily examined school choice behavior but are the ones that merit attention if free choice is to be truly available to everyone. The fact that these parents were unaware of choice is one of the important areas taken up in the next section of this paper.

Implications of This Study for School Systems

In this study the investigator interviewed parents involved in making school choices for their children. The findings indicated that the majority of parents not only wanted the opportunity to have school choices but indicated that they took the opportunity seriously. All parents aware of choice made some kind of school decision and did not leave the placement of their child to the school system. Seventy-four per cent of the parents making a school choice (25 out of 34 parents) were moderate to active searchers and used their choice opportunity to select the school they felt most suited to their child. Few parents aware of choice made a decision with little deliberation. For the most part the parents searched actively. They sought information about the schools in order to make a decision with

which they would be comfortable. There was enough diversity of schools to make the choice significant for these parents.

Several issues emerge from this choice opportunity. The first major issue is the one of the general level of awareness of the choice opportunity. This study indicated that although all parents expressed the desire to be instrumental in making educational choices for their children, parents at the lower end of the socioeconomic range were less likely to have heard about their choice opportunities and less likely to have either heard about the school choice or to have deliberated over their school options. Middle class parents are in a milieu that focuses upon the retrieval of information. They read newspaper articles about the schools, associate with other middle class persons at work and at leisure who are talking about school issues, survey literature about schools, talk to other middle class parents about their local school situation and investigate sources of information as a natural part of their search process and everyday living. These activities do not appear to be the ordinary activities of lower socioeconomic class parents. Furthermore, these parents do not have either the skills or the knowledge to maximize school choice opportunities nor the time to adequately research their choices.

Thus, school systems offering choice must make extensive efforts to reach those parents who have less access to the information network and less familiarity with the decision making process. The schools must be willing to determine not only how best to inform parents of school choices, but also how best to help them to make informed decisions. Data on school programs, activities, teachers, philosophical orientations and educational

goals within the different schools must be readily available, not only in written information, since the lower socioeconomic class parent often does not read available literature, but also by school personnel designated to talk with parents. Through such persons there can be greater assurance that the information will be disseminated. The parental reactions reflected in this study are in essence a mandate to school systems offering choice to present that choice widely, equally, and clearly to all so that it will not be possible for parents to have lived in a school system for several years and not be aware of the choices available to them, a situation which existed on several occasions in this study. If schools offering choice do not make the information accessible to all, they are in effect skimming off the already advantaged group and eliminating the already disadvantaged.

A second issue arising from school choice is that of parent commitment to the school as a result of choice. It appears from this study that the parental search activity elicited by choice generated greater parental commitment. Since parents chose the educational environment which they considered conducive to the growth of their child, they seemed more committed to the school's goals and more supportive of the school. At the time of the interviews (about one half year after the beginning of school) no one wanted to change to the other school of choice. In an age when parents complain about school discipline, school responsibility and teacher incompetence, there appeared to be very little of this dissatisfaction among these parents. (However, these parents' responses were not compared to the responses of parents not having school choice opportunities--perhaps an interesting comparison.) It would appear that the process of choice contributes to greater parental satisfaction and increased parental support

for the schools, an important point for school administrators.

The third issue is that of respecting parental decision--an essential factor--if choice is to be meaingful to the parent. If choice is offered (be it of a school, a program, or a teacher) then the school system must be aware of how far it will go to honor that decision, despite additional problems to the system or despite the possibility that the school may not agree that the decision is the best one for the child. Moreover, respecting parental decision might raise other questions involving school performance or school enrollment.

For example, would a school unattentive to parent and student needs be underenrolled, or would a teacher who consistently fails to impress parents and children lack students? In this study the reverse was the case: in one school a teacher's classroom was often oversubscribed and the principal could not always honor parental choice. He would honor choice on a first come, first serve basis. Could and would school and teacher performance when dependent upon subscribers or what parents observed in schools and the classroom improve? Would both the school and the teacher create the kind of environment conducive to student needs? And lastly, would student performance improve if teacher performance improved? If so, this would be a positive result of choice in addition to that which one expects to be fostered by the mere matching of a value system with a compatible educational environment. Most important, school choice offers parents the opportunity to free their children from environments forced upon them by virtue of living patterns, social class, and conditions beyond their control and to choose instead one commensurate with their aspirations.

Allowing parental choice in school options poses problems for school

systems in terms of making the differences among the schools clear, in providing parents with criteria upon which to base decisions, and in respecting those decisions. But it also poses an additional problem, a fourth and perhaps larger issue for school systems. Many educators contend today that a heterogeneous school environment (diversity of cultures and socio-economic classes) is, as a learning environment, superior to a homogeneous one. But such a heterogeneous environment may be impossible to maintain over a long period of time within the context of extensive choice. Bridges (1976) points out, for example, that if parents choose schools solely on the basis of values which result from their social class backgrounds, parental choice may result in greater homogeneity in the classroom and the educational environment, in a resegregation which would threaten the personal and social growth as well as the future mobility and training of children in the system.

> Collectively these results raise some important policy questions about multiple option systems of schooling. They suggest that parents' individual choices will result in greater classroom homogeneity in terms of social class and ability. If the schools that children attend come to look more like their homes, the proportion of variance in educational outcomes which is accounted for by school inputs will decrease, and the proportion of variance accounted for by home inputs will increase.
>
> (Bridges, 1976, p. 19)

A classroom could easily become a room of one class, one race, etc. Bridges (1976) sums up these thoughts when he says:

> On the one hand, this grouping by social class and family background may affect the probabilities that children will acquire class-related beliefs, attitudes, values, physical skills, and social competencies. Presumably, the social mobility of working class children is facilitated by the acquisition of a middle class orientation. . . . In sum, lower class parents' choices in MOS (Multiple Option Systems) districts may facilitate the academic achievement of their children, while simultaneously reducing the

> probability that these children will acquire the middle class attitudes, beliefs, values, social competencies, and physical skills required for social mobility.
> (Bridges, pp. 22-23)

This study can neither substantiate nor refute Bridges' ideas since Collegeville had not been studied over a long enough period of time.

Nevertheless, the school with the greatest variety of parents--economically, racially and ethnically--was the most desired school in this particular study and had still retained its variety. Again it must be remembered that this community was atypical in nature and the issue raised here is both important and unresolved.

Suggestions for Further Research

This study examined the choice process of a group of parents in one specific community, one which admittedly is atypical in its composition. It revealed clear parental preferences and active parent involvement in search prior to decision making. The study also examined criteria for choice, questioning previously stated reasons for choice and introducing some alternative possibilities. It concluded with some policy implications for school districts. If these policy implications are to be explored, there are several areas for further research.

One area focuses on the nature of the choices offered. Collegeville presented not only school choice but also teacher choice. In this analysis it was often difficult to separate the process of choosing a school from choosing a teacher. Since schools must be willing to accept parental sovereignty without subverting parental choice, they must consider carefully what choices can be offered. Should parents be allowed just school choice,

with pupil placement within the school being the professional responsibility of the school system in order to avoid the genuinely difficulty problems that arise from extended choice (inappropriate teacher, imbalance in teacher load, too few children in one school)? Additional studies are necessary to determine how parents would act if given only a school choice, a limited rather than extended choice.

The last and perhaps most important area for further research and clarification would appear to be further investigation of parental criteria for choice. This study attempted to examine with the available data what "atmosphere" and "environment" meant to the parents whose choices rested so heavily on them. The terms were refined somewhat, but this study has only made a beginning in defining the global responses of parents faced with choice. Since this study did raise questions about some generally assumed criteria for choice--distance, association with those of a different race, and personal influence--further research should try to determine more precisely the actual criteria for choice in today's educational settings, since the examples gleaned from this study--atmosphere, classroom structure, teacher-pupil relationships, quality of the educational environment--are not yet sufficiently clarified. A further determination will be of vital importance if districts are to offer choices that cover a distinct range of parental preferences.

Conclusions

The long-term results of choice carried out in educational settings across the country, however, are unpredictable. Whether parents choose because of their value orientations or because they have alternatives

(i.e., private schools or other schools of choice) if their choice does not work out is one unanswered question. And the lasting results of choice on the schools themselves have yet to be determined. Whether parental choice will significantly affect school structure is not known. Whether parents will have an effect on teaching competency by refusing to choose a teacher, classroom or school remains to be demonstrated. Whether schools which no longer serve a clientele will close for lack of a sufficient student body while others more receptive to their clientele enlarge also remains to be seen. No one yet knows if parents searching for congruent values will segregate themselves by class and ability. Finally, the question arises whether schools will have even less of an impact on children than they now do as a result of increased family choice in schooling. All these issues have been raised in this summary because they are important possible implications of school choice opportunity. It is not possible yet to judge if self-selection will be harmful or helpful to children in the future. Yet it is hard to turn away from Coons' and Sugarman's case for choice (1977) in which they conclude:

> Nevertheless, freedom to select one's own way could have profound psychological significance, even if only the few employ it to alter their external experience in substantial respects. To choose what has previously been compelled is choosing nonetheless. Perhaps the difference is only a matter of human dignity and our view of one another. To us that seems enough. (p. 148)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Bridges, R. Gary. Family choice in schooling: Are parents willing and able to participate in schooling decisions? Manuscript. Columbia University.

Bridges, R. Gary, Blackman, Julie Lopez, Morellos, Martin. How Parents Choose Schools in Multiple Options Systems. Paper presented at AERA, San Francisco, April, 1976.

Coons, John E., Sugarman, Stephen D. Choice. Unpublished manuscript, Berkeley, 1976.

Fantini, Mario. Education by Choice. NASSP Bulletin, Sept., 1973, 57, 10-19.

Fantini, Mario. Public Schools of Choice. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1973.

Hollingshead, A. B. Two Factor Index of Social Position. Unpublished manuscript, 1957.

Institute for Contemporary Studies. Parents Teachers and Children. Prospects for Choice in American Education. San Francisco, 1977.

Rossi, Peter. Why Families Move. Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1955.

Sonnenfeld, David. The Educational Market Place: Toward a Theory of Family Choice in Schooling. Eugene, Oregon: Oregon University, 1973. (Eric Doc. Rep. SUS, No. Ed 082375)

I am interested in talking with parents about their concerns related to the schooling their children will receive. You were picked because I am anxious to talk to parents who are using the schools for the first time. Summary observations of data collected will be shared with the school system. All individual interviews will be kept anonymous. In no way will the school system know whose responses they are examining.

1. Address _____

2. How long have you lived in Collegeville? _____

3. Why did you move to Collegeville? (Open ended)
If you look at your card, perhaps you can give me answers in order of your priorities. Please rank the four most important reasons.

card 1

1. The community was close to where my husband/I work.
2. Friends encouraged us to move into the community.
3. We heard that there were good schools in Collegeville.
4. We wanted to live in an integrated community.
5. There was reasonably priced housing in Collegeville.
6. We understood that Collegeville was a heterogeneous community in which to live.
7. We thought there were a lot of other people with life styles similar to our own.
8. Real estate agents had told us about the community.

4. What is your husband's occupation? Title of job _____

Place of work _____

5. What is your occupation? (wife) Title of job _____

Place of work _____

6. What is the highest educational level:

card 2

mother	father		
_____	_____	1.	Professional School
_____	_____	2.	Graduate School ____ What level ____
_____	_____	3.	College (number of years) _____
_____	_____	4.	High School _____
_____	_____	5.	8th grade

7. What are the ages of your children _____ _____ _____

8. What age child attends what school? _____

_____

_____

9. I am particularly interested in the schools children use. I understand from the previous question that your kindergarten (or other) child is attending _____school. Did you consider sending him/her elsewhere? _____

If yes, where _____ (go to question No. 17).

If no, answer questions 10-16.

10. Some neighborhoods within Collegeville have optional attendance plans; that is, children can go to more than one school without question. Are you aware that this is one of those areas that gives parents a choice of schools?_____

11. Do you recall getting any information about this choice? _____

12. What kind of information would you like to have had that would have helped inform you of this choice? Check numbers from the card.

card 3

1. A telephone call from the schools under the option plan.
2. Printed brochure discussing these choices sent to your home.
3. A telephone call from the superintendent's office.
4. This information printed in the 'Collegeville local newspaper.
5. Any other source that might have been informative. Please explain specifically what this might be.

13. You have a choice between _____ and _____ schools. Are you familiar with these schools? _____ If you were to make a choice now what school might you select? _____

14. Could you give me some reasons for this selection? (Open ended first) Some people have given reasons that are on this sheet of paper. Would you please look at this list. Then carefully go through the items and check in column one those items that are most important to you. Now, check in column two those items that are least important to you. Finally, those items in column one that you checked as most important I would like you to rank order the top five in order of importance to you with number one being the most important.

1. We were concerned about the distance to school. We wanted the school that was the closest walk for our children.
2. The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.
3. We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.
4. The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.
5. We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.
6. We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.
7. We wanted to know what the overall achievement level of the pupils was.
8. We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own.
9. We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her personal teaching style and classroom skills.
10. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.
11. We wanted a school where transportation could be provided either by a parent on the way to work or by the school system.
12. We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and the teachers.
13. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds.
14. We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.
15. We were most concerned about the physical facilities of the school.

15. Have you had the chance to get at all involved in school affairs? (in this district or someplace else)

    1. Do you go to conferences with your teachers? ____ How often?
    2. Do you go to PTA meetings? ____ If so, how often?
    3. Do you go to school board meetings? ____ If so, how often?
    4. Do you belong to any parent groups? _____
    5. Have you ever been a room mother? ____
    6. Have you ever been a classroom volunteer? ____
    7. Have you ever been a PTA officer? _____

16. Do you have any acquaintances who are on the school board, active in school affairs, volunteers in the schools or hold a political office in the community? ____ If so, did you talk to any of them about the schools? If yes, can you recall what you talked about.

17. If you considered sending your child to another school, you must be aware that you live in an area in which you have an option of two elementary schools. In what way were you informed of your choice?

(That is, how did you find out about the option.) Please pick the applicable numbers on your card.

Once the numbers have been picked probe to find out who told them what. That is, what kind of information did they get from each source.

1. Neighbors
2. Friends
3. Others (who)

card 4

4. League of Women Voters
5. School system central office
6. Literature from the school system
7. School meeting of some kind - specify
8. Influential community leader such as a school board member, political leader, school volunteer or a neighbor active in the community

18. Have you had the chance to get at all involved in school affairs? (either here or in another district)

1. Do you go to conferences with your teachers? How often? ____
2. Do you go to PTA meetings? _____ If so, how often?
3. Do you go to school board meetings? If so, how often? ____
4. Do you belong to any parent groups? _____
5. Have you ever been a room mother? ____
6. Have you ever been a classroom volunteer? _____
7. Have you ever been a PTA officer? ____

19. Do you have any acquaintances who are on the school board, active in school affairs, volunteers in the schools or hold a political office in the community? ____ If so, did you talk to any of them about your school choices? If yes, can you recall what you talked about?

20. What kind of information did you want to know about the schools? That is, what did you consider important to look for when seeking information? (Open ended first) Some people have given reasons that are on this sheet of paper. Would you please look at this list. Then carefully go through the items and check in column one those items that are <u>most</u> important to you. Now, check in column two those items that are <u>least</u> important to you. Finally, I would like you to rank order five items in column one that you checked as most important in order of their importance to you with number one being the most important.

1. We were concerned about the distance to school. We wanted the school that was the closest walk for our children.

2. The general atmosphere of the school was the sort we wanted for our child.
3. We were interested in a school that was racially integrated.
4. The principal's philosophy of education and attitude toward children was one we felt comfortable with.
5. We were concerned that the walk to the school we chose was the safest route for our child; that is, there were crossing guards or a safe walking path.
6. We responded to the overall curriculum and academic programs of the school.
7. We wanted to know what the overall achievement level of the pupils was.
8. We wanted a school where the children's background is similar to our own.
9. We were very interested in our child's teacher. We investigated her/his personal teaching style and classroom skills.
10. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different ethnic and racial backgrounds.
11. We wanted a school where transportation could be provided either by a parent on the way to work or by the school system.
12. We wanted to be certain we would have accessibility to both the principal and the teachers.
13. We wanted a school where the children would be exposed to children of different socioeconomic backgrounds.
14. We wanted to be certain the school had a good library or learning resource center.
15. We were most concerned about the physical facilities of the school.

21. To whom did you go to get your information? Can you remember what sources you personally used? (Open ended first) Did you use any of the following sources. Check the ones you used.

Then ask what kind of information they got from each source.

card 5

1. The principal of the school
2. The superintendent or the central administration
3. The school bulletin
4. The local PTA
5. Neighbors
6. Any friends in the community
7. Any teachers from either school
8. Any influential community persons such as school board members, politically active community members, school volunteers, persons holding political office.

22. Can you recall what you did when deciding about a school. That is, what was the sequence of events you followed prior to making a decision about a school. How did you go about gathering information and processing this information.

PROBE:
1. How did you become aware of decisions?
2. What kind of searching did you do?
3. If visited the schools what did they look for.
4. How often did they return to a school?
5. Did they want an academically oriented school and how could they tell?
6. What did they regard as important school related variables?
7. What were their priorities: What did they want for their child.
8. What were the most important factors you considered?

23. What is your notion about how far a five or six year old child can reasonably walk to school?

24. Would you let that child walk further to school than you would let him/her go to play with a friend? Do you have any boundaries beyond which your child may not go to play?

25. Are there any other factors more important than distance to consider when children are walking to school?

26. Can you recall when you first began to think about this decision? How long have you been considering this?

27. When was the peak decision making period in your family?

28. Do you recall the most important factors or criteria that you considered when you were at the point of making a decision about which school to use? I KNOW I HAVE ASKED THIS, BUT IT IS SO IMPORTANT TO ME THAT I WANT TO BE CERTAIN I UNDERSTAND YOUR RESPONSE.

29. Are you satisfied with your choice of schools? _____ (If no, probe why)

30. Were you glad to have had the opportunity to make a choice? Why?

As you think over your choice process could you tell me which number on this card best reflects how you found that process to be.

card 6

1. It was an easy choice for us to make.
2. The choice was easy but we had some concern.
3. The choice process was lengthy but not too difficult.
4. The choice was tough for us but the decision came fairly quickly.
5. The choice process was a lot of trouble and was time consuming.
6. The choice process was agonizing and caused us much tension and concern.

31. If you were to make this decision again, would you do it differently?

32. When you think back on the decision making process, did you think it would be possible to change back to another school if you were not satisfied?

33. Could you describe the role your husband took in this decision making process?